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ABSTRACT

In decoding a text, one chooses the interpretation involving maximal redundancy, selecting meanings that are most likely and least surprising in the relevant context. Clues for this selection of meanings are gathered from phonetic, phonemic, morphological, syntactic, lexical, and stylistic levels. In disambiguating third-person-pronoun references in reported speech (e.g., "John said to Peter that he had to go to town"), one is often compelled to fall back on examining the reporting verbs for the conditions under which they can be felicitously used and matching them with one's knowledge of the pragmatic relations reported in the text. This illustrates that there is a limit to how far pragmatic meaning can be captured through formal syntactic rules alone before it becomes necessary to move to another strategy of interpretation. (MSE)

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FELICITY CONDITIONS, PREFERRED INTERPRETATIONS, AND DISAMBIGUATIONS OF PRONOMINAL REFERENCE IN REPORTED SPEECH

by

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1. Background

The starting-point of the present paper is the general observation that in the quest for referents for pronouns, one important criterion beside formal clues such as morphological agreement is contextual and pragmatic plausibility. As several linguists have pointed out, the preferred interpretations of formally ambiguous sentences such as

(1) (a) The guards shot at the prisoners and I saw several of them fall.
(b) The guards shot at the prisoners and I saw several of them turn away.
(c) The guards shot at the prisoners and I saw several of them escape.
(d) The guards shot at the prisoners and I saw several of them turn pale.
(e) The guards shot at the prisoners and I saw several of them fix their bayonets.

depend on our judgments of how the world is most likely to work. If guards shoot at prisoners, who, the guards or the prisoners, are more likely to fall, turn away, escape, turn pale, or fix their bayonets? When the

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sentences are given out of context and in isolation, we have little difficulty in arriving at preferred interpretations for sentences such as (1a, b, c) and (e). (1d) is more abiguous, as both shooters and victims have good reasons to turn pale. It is, however, possible to change the interpretational plausibilities by the addition of new contextual and situational clues. Thus compare (1e) in isolation with the same sentence in context (1e'):

(1) (e') The guards shot at the prisoners and I saw several of them fix their bayonets. When raiding the prison store, the prisoners had succeeded in taking plenty of rifles and bayonets but no ammunition. Now they had to rely on cold steel and try a desperate bayonet charge in a hail of bullets.

In the following, I shall exemplify the effect of pragmatic plausability on interpretation. My examples will involve pronominal disambiguation with the aid of clues provided by the semantic properties of some reporting verbs.

2. Morphologic and pragmatic disambiguation

2.1. Standard grammars have long been preoccupied with the adjustments of pronouns, moods, tenses, deictics, adverbials, and perhaps even converses such as come and go in paraphrases of direct into reported speech and vice versa. Paraphrases such as

(2) (a) Yesterday John shouted through the window: "I must ask you to come out and help me with the boat, because I must go to town from the island tomorrow."

(b) Yesterday (one day last week, etc.) John shouted through the window that he had to ask me to go out and help him with the boat because he had to go to town from the island today (on the next day, etc.).

From a textual point of view, we can say that sentences with reported speech, or indirect discourse such as erlebte Rede or discours indirect libre, involve at least two layers of text: a frame, and a reported text. These have to be fused into one single linear string, where the frame becomes the matrix and the reported text is embedded into the matrix. Certain adjustments then take place in the embedding to make it harmonize with the matrix. These adjustments mark the fusion of the reported text into the frame. But at the same time they provide the receiver of the message with

cues that enable him to separate the two textual layers. To understand the message, the receiver must be able to reconstruct the original text layers out of the fused result: if he hears or reads (2b), he must be able to reconstruct (2a).

2.2. The reason why the disambiguation of third-person pronouns in reported speech is of particular interest is well-known. The adjustments involved in the embedding of direct quotations neutralize certain pronominal differences that are distinct in the quotations. Compare

(3) (a) John said to Peter: "I must go to town."
"You must go to town."
"He must go to town."

(b) John said to Peter that he had to go to town.

(3b) can be a paraphrase of all three sentences in (3a). If we change the pronoun of (3b) as in

(3) (c) John said to Peter that I had to go to town.
(d) John said to Peter that you had to go to town.

the I and you are no longer coreferential with the I and you in (3a): they no longer refer to John and Peter but to the persons who utter and receive sentences (3c) and (3d).

2.3. The clues disambiguating pronominal references in reported speech are of two kinds. First there are formal syntactic clues, including morphologically marked agreement between pronoun and referent, and relative order between pronoun and referent or potential referents. The relative places of pronouns and referents in the sentence structure as a whole may also affect the interpretation. Secondly there are pragmatic clues giving rise to preferential interpretations on grounds of degrees of plausability. Generally, morphological marking of agreement is hierarchically the strongest kind of clue and capable of overriding non-morphological and pragmatic clues. Thus in

(4) Alison told me that Bill would like her to shave her beard off.

the feminine her at once overrides the pragmatic likelihood that beard is

associated with Bill rather than with Alison. Formal agreement thus compels us to look for ways of ascribing beard to the girl, through metaphorical interpretation if no literal interpretation is available. Only as a last resort are we willing to dismiss the sentence as nonsense too deviant for any kind of interpretation.

To Auli Hakulinen I owe an even more dramatic example of preferred interpretation. The sentence

(5) (a) The dentist told the patient to try on his false teeth.

would presumably pass without a query though it is formally ambiguous. To give it its more newsworthy and pragmatically less likely interpretation, we must mark it in some contextually appropriate way, for instance as a newspaper headline,

(5) (b) Dentist Told Patient To Try On His False Teeth!!!

2.4. If the reporting is recursive and there are no contextual clues suggesting preferred interpretations, it becomes impossible to disentangle the referents and disambiguate the pronominal references. First and second-person pronouns in the singular are of course disambiguated thanks to the speech situation: the first person refers to the speaker and the second person to the addressee, irrespective of the depth of the embedding, as in

(6) (a) Alison told Betty that Charlie had said that Dorothy had told Eric that Francis had called me a fool.

(b) Alison told Betty that Charlie had said that Dorothy had told Eric that Francis had called you a fool.

If the first and second-person pronouns are in the plural, ambiguities may arise as to precisely who should be included in the group referred to by we and you. But with pronouns in the third person, in the absence of disambiguating features of a formal kind, the ambiguity is inherent not only in pragmatic reference but also in syntax. This will be so for instance in (6), which contains more than one possible male and more than one possible female referent:

(6) (c) Alison told Betty that Charlie had said that Dorothy had told Eric that Francis had called him/her a fool.

At this point, somebody may object that there is a limit as to how much such recursive reporting a real-life act of communication can tolerate. One answer would be that, in Chomskyan terms, such limits are matters of performance rather than of competence. For the present argument it is more relevant to note that the interpretability of sentences such as (6c) depends on contextual and situational plausibilities of the kind illustrated above in paragraphs 1 and 2.3. Thus (6c) would be far less ambiguous in a context such as

(6) (d) Mary: "John, do you know what Francis thinks of Alison? Does he think she is bright enough for the job?"
John: "I think not. Actually Alison told Betty that Charlie had said that Dorothy had told Eric that Francis had called her a fool. I don't think she should apply because she really hasn't a chance."

Whatever we think of the likelihood that such long strings of recursive embeddings would occur outside the grammarian's laboratory, (6d) is clear enough as to preferred interpretation: her obviously refers to Alison rather than to Dorothy. We might, then, say that (6d) is all right for clarity of meaning. If we wish to avoid using (6d) we presumably do so for reasons other than a fear of ambiguity -- such a cumbersome structure is, to begin with, likely to offend our sense of stylistic appropriateness.

3. Reporting verbs as disambiguators

3.1. So far, I have exemplified reporting verbs with tell, say, and call. All three yield few clues to the relations obtaining between the actants. In other words, all three are predicates placing relatively few constraints on the relations obtaining between their arguments. Thus anybody can 'tell' or 'say' someting to somebody else, given the physical means (a face-to-face contact or suitable apparatus such as a telephone). But there are reporting verbs whose semantics are specific enough to restrict the range of plausible interpretations. Compare

(7) (a) Alfred told Bert that Carl had called him a clever man.
(b) Alfred told Bert that the professor had called his thesis the best of the year.
(8) (a) Alfred boasted to Bert that Charlie had called him a clever man.

(b) Alfred boasted to Bert that the professor had called his thesis the best of the year.

In (7), him and his cannot be disambiguated without further context. In (8), however, the reporting verb, boasted, gives a clue towards disambiguation. To boast means to extol oneself, to be proud of something. When interpreting (8a) and (8b), we therefore try to find that pronoun-to-antecedent relationship which harmonizes best with Alfred's extolling himself. If (8a) is read in isolation, the most likely interpretation is that him refers to Alfred; only if we know that Alfred is somehow responsible for Bert's cleverness, and proud of it, are we justified in interpreting him as referring to Bert. Similarly his is likely to refer to Bert in (8b) only if Alfred feels responsible for the excellence of the thesis. Such extensive background knowledge is necessary if him and his in (8) are to be understood to refer to Bert rather than to Alfred.

3.2. The reasons why reporting verbs like boast have a strong pragmatic disambiguating power are inherent in the semantics of these verbs. Let us next look at some syntactically ambiguous instances with warn:

(9) (a) Alice warned Betty that she was in a filthy mood.
(b) Alice warned Betty that she was doing a dangerous thing.
(c) Alice warned Betty that Charlie had promised to divorce her.
(d) Alice warned Betty that she should be more careful in the future.

When interpreting these sentences we presumably at once try to relate them to

(10) (a) Alice warned Betty: "I am in a filthy mood."
(b) Alice warned Betty: "You are doing a dangerous thing."
(c) Alice warned Betty: "Charlie has promised to divorce you."
(d) Alice warned Betty: "You should be more careful in the future."

For (9a), 10a) is a plausible interpretation because people know more about their own moods than about those of others. For (9b) and (9c), (10b) and (10c) are plausible interpretations because it is natural to assume that Alice warns Betty about things that will happen to Betty rather than to herself. And for (9d), (10d) is plausible because people often give advice to others rather than to themselves. But it is possible to think of contexts

in which (9a-d) are plausibly interpreted with different assignments of antecedents:

(11) (a) Alice knew that when Betty was in a filthy mood, she was likely to do things she later regretted. Therefore Alice warned Betty: "You are in a filthy mood." She was hoping that Betty would go home at once.

(b) Alice knew that if she would get caught printing ten-pound notes, her sister Betty would be in trouble too. Therefore Alice warned Betty: "I am doing a dangerous thing."

(c) Alice knew that if she was divorced, her daughter Betty would lose the only home she had ever known. Therefore Alice warned Betty: "Charlie has promised to divorce me."

(d) Alice warned Betty: "I shall be more careful in the future." She wanted Betty to know that she would not let herself be cheated a second time, as she had been when Betty spent all the shopping money on candy.

The contexts in (11) add certain conditions which make it possible to refer the pronouns to antecedents different from those in the uncontextualized instances under (10). Again, we base our interpretations on a reconstruction of different possible worlds, choosing that possible world which best satisfies the conditions given in the context.

3.3. Next we should have an overall look at reporting verbs, to see to what extent a taxonomy of them offers clues as to the disambiguation of third-person pronouns in embedded clauses. To begin with, the question arises whether reporting verbs are a closed class at all. They can also be seen as an open category which can be extended, by metaphor if need be. Then, those reporting verbs which express verbal communication merge into a large class of other complementizing verbs that dominate embedded sentences but do not necessarily imply verbal communication (think, guess, and the like). Fortunately, even a very rough semantic classification into neutral verbs (say, think), verbs referring to modalities and relations between participants in a speech act (ask, inquire, request, answer, inform, tell, agree, disagree, accept, deny), verbs referring to memory (remember, forget), verbs referring to manner of communicating (speak, shout, yell, whisper, jot down, note down, write, wire, signal), verbs referring to understanding or epistemic certainty (understand, know, presume, guess, believe, assume), verbs referring to unreality (dream, imagine, fancy), and perhaps a few other categories suffices to show that pragmatic clues are particularly common with that category of reporting verbs which expresses

attitude: promise, regret, fear, assert, claim, acknowledge, admit, boast, threaten, warn; and also with the verbs that refer both to attitude and manner: laugh, smile, wave, wink, cry, sob (as in "Charlie left me yesterday," Mary sobbed.).

3.4. To disambiguate pronominal reference, we must thus look into the semantic relations and roles of the noun phrases connected with each reporting verb of the attitudinal category. Such analyses must consider not only the syntactic properties of these verbs, but also the conditions under which they can be felicitously used. Thus information such as the following should go into the lexical specifications of these verbs:

To warn takes three noun phrases: one indicating the person who warns, another indicating the person who is being warned, and a third indicating what the warning is about (A warns B of C). Warn is used felicitously if it implies that C is a matter of negative consequences to B ("if C, then B is in trouble"),and that A either wants to help B by informing him about the risk he is running if he does C, or wants to discourage B from doing C for other reasons.

To boast takes three noun phrases: one indicating the person who boasts, another indicating the person who receives the boast, and a third indicating what the boasting is about (A boasts to B about C). Boast is used felicitously only if the action or achievement expressed through C has come about by some action or interest of A's which A regards as having a strongly positive value in the relevant universe of discourse.

Such felicity conditions imply very definite pragmatic relations between constituents of the sentence. The receiver's strategy of interpretation is to reconstruct such relations, starting out from his knowledge of the felicity conditions which are part of the semantic specification of the verbs in question. If the structure is ambiguous, the interpreter chooses the one which is most plausible in the universe of that particular discourse. A person who knows that universe may interpret a sentence differently from a person who does not. For instance, a person who knows that Alfred has taught Bert everything he, Bert, knows, may interpret sentences (8a) and (8b) differently from a person who has never heard of Alfred or Bert.

4. Concluding remark

"The best meaning", said Martin Joos in discussing what some linguists have called 'Joos's Law', "is the least meaning." When we decode a text, we choose that interpretation which involves maximal redundancy: we select those meanings that are most likely and least surprising in the relevant context, situation and universe of discourse. Clues for this selection of meanings can be accumulated from different levels: the phonetic, the phonemic, the morphological, the syntactic, the lexical, and the stylistic. In the present frame of reference, what interests us is not, however, merely that Joos's Law is valid. The above examples have shown that when we try to disambiguate third-person-pronoun references in reported speech, we are often compelled to fall back upon a matching of felicity conditions of reporting verbs with our knowledge of the pragmatics reflected in the text. There is, in other words, a ceiling to how far we can capture pragmatic meanings through formal syntactic rules alone. In interpreting linguistic messages, we make good use of our knowledge of the ways in which language reflects the world.

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